

Homosexuality: Will It Preach?

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1. Should Homosexuality Be Addressed in a Sermon?

An obvious advantage of using a lectionary in preaching is its discipline. The preacher is forced to deal with the whole of the biblical canon and not just with those texts which lend themselves to his or her agenda. The disadvantage, of course, is that the historical and cultural distance between the biblical world and the contemporary church may mean that many issues which confront the church today were either unknown to the writers of the Bible or received only scant attention. The writers of the Bible were not aware of the problems posed by the destruction of the ozone layer or by genetic engineering. Nor should we assume that when the Bible mentions things such as family, marriage, and divorce that what it means by those terms is the same thing as our understanding and experience of them.

One issue which troubles both society and the church today and which may or may not be addressed by the Bible is homosexuality. While it is difficult to know precisely what percent of the population can be described as homosexual in orientation most research in human sexuality in North American culture suggests a figure in the neighborhood of seven to ten percent. There is no reason to think that what describes the population in general is not also true of many churches, and if anything like ten percent of the Christian population is homosexual then homosexuality is as much a reality in the life of the church as it is in society. Whether they know it or not, most Christians have homosexual acquaintances, friends, and relatives.

Homosexuality has become an especially important topic for the Christian community. The church, like the rest of society, has witnessed the rapid spread of AIDS in this decade and the horrible suffering of those who contract it. While most who are concerned with the disease AIDS no longer associate it exclusively with the homosexual community nor do they see it as a homosexual's problem, a large percentage of the victims of AIDS are homosexuals (mostly male) and many of those are Christians. What does the church say to their suffering and to the widespread fear AIDS has created in society?

At another level, as homosexuality has become a more public reality in the latter half of the twentieth century, the church has become confused about what Christian faith has to say about homosexuality. There is a widespread perception that homosexual practice must be rejected and condemned by the Christian community. Many churches insist that homosexual activity is sinful, and base their position on biblical texts such as Leviticus 18:26ff.; Genesis 19; and Romans 1:26ff. Other Christians believe that the Bible is either silent or unclear about what the contemporary world refers to as homosexuality. A growing number of people who publicly announce that they are Christian and homosexual insist that neither their sexual orientation nor their sexual activity

is incompatible with Christian faith. Some Christians, and not just homosexual Christians, believe that all the offices of the church, including ordained positions, should be open to homosexual people.

Given the reality of homosexuality in the general population, the terrible suffering caused by AIDS, and the confusion in the church about homosexuality, it might appear surprising that homosexuality is so infrequently addressed in mainline Protestant churches. It would seem that responsible Christian preaching would have to address an issue that has such urgency for society and the church. And yet one seldom hears the issue discussed in sermons. When preachers do address the issue, one often gets the impression that the preacher took a deep breath and then ducked in anticipation of the response from all sides.

Of course it is not self-evident that ministers should address the issue of homosexuality in preaching. It may well be that there are other aspects of the church's life, such as the education program, which are better suited to discussion of the issue. It may also be that the emotional and psychological condition of a congregation at a particular moment may be such that a sermon on homosexuality would only create greater confusion and alienation. On the other hand, the judgment that "we are not yet ready to discuss it" can also be a safe and convenient excuse for avoiding a difficult issue. The judgment about whether to preach on homosexuality and when to do so is just as important as the question of how one should preach and what one should say.

2. How To Preach On Homosexuality

We will not presume to tell others what they should say about homosexuality from the perspective of Christian faith. We do think, however, that there are a number of considerations one should keep in mind if one decides to address the issue.

First, it is important to acknowledge some obvious but important facts. Homosexuals are not a group of people "out there" in the population. They sit in the pews of most churches, and sometimes are our friends and in our families. We are not talking about "them," but about "us" and sometimes about "ourselves." It is also the case that homosexuality usually evokes strong emotional reactions from all concerned. Most discussions of homosexuality raise questions directly or indirectly about sexual and personal identity. Because sexuality is so much a part of personal identity, it can be an emotional and explosive issue. Most people do not simply have opinions about homosexuality: they have strong feelings as well. There is widespread confusion in society and in the church about human sexuality and which forms of sexual activity are appropriate and which are inappropriate. (When was the last time you did premarital counseling with a couple who were *not* living together—that is if you even bothered to ask?)

It also must be acknowledged that those who study human sexuality vigorously disagree about the origin and the causes of homosexuality. Is homosexuality an acquired and learned form of behavior or is it the result of genetic encoding? There is no clear, unambiguous answer to that question. Some

authorities have suggested that homosexuality occurs in much the same fashion as does, say, left-handedness. It just happens and knowing why or how may be of secondary importance.

These “facts” need to be acknowledged at the beginning of any discussion of homosexuality. Consequently, it is not surprising that there are serious differences of opinion among Christians about homosexuality. While it is certainly true that homophobia is as much a reality within the life of the church as in society as a whole, not all Christians who believe homosexual behavior to be incompatible with Christian faith are necessarily homophobic. Nor is it true that one cannot be a faithful Christian (regardless of one’s sexual orientation) and believe that the church has been mistaken in its understanding and treatment of homosexuality. Faithful Christians can be found on both sides of this difficult issue.

Second, many Christians will insist that the church’s position on homosexuality should be settled on the basis of the authority of the Bible. Homosexuality, however, is an excellent example of most of the problems in biblical hermeneutics. A careful, critical reading of texts such as Genesis 19; Leviticus 18; and Romans 1 suggests that it is not at all clear that what is described in these texts is the same thing as what we mean by “homosexuality.”

If one cannot proof-text an answer from the Bible to the questions posed by homosexuality, that does not mean, as some Christians have concluded, that the Bible is silent on the subject and its silence renders it irrelevant to the church’s discussions and decisions. On the contrary, as is the case with most social issues, the hermeneutical problem is both exegetical and theological. The Bible may not give us a blueprint for structuring human relationships in general or human sexuality in particular, but it does press upon us theological symbols, themes, and convictions which are as relevant to Christian faith in the twentieth century as in the first. The importance of making and keeping promises, of covenant and commitment, of faithfulness, is in the first place a Jewish and Christian conviction about the nature of God and God’s relation to the world, and therefore, a conviction about how people should live in relation to one another. Indeed, the issue of human relations may not be so much its sexual orientation but rather its faithfulness. The issue may be more one of promiscuity and not sexual orientation.

One exegetical and theological issue of particular importance is found in Romans 1:26ff. Is there a normative pattern or structure for human sexuality? Has God created and ordained one form of human sexuality such that anything contrary to it is “unnatural” and violates not only custom and convention but also an order or law of nature? Some Christians read Romans 1:26ff. in precisely that way. And when Romans 1:26ff. is read in conjunction with Genesis 1:26, it can be argued that what God intends and hence what is “normative” for human sexuality is heterosexuality. Most of us are aware that this is the conclusion of Karl Barth. For Barth not only is heterosexuality normative but males have preeminence of a sort over females. Despite the fact that Christians traditionally have linked these texts, why should these two texts be the primary basis for what the church considers “normative” in human sexuality? Were there not other factors—psychological and sociological—at work in

the church's selection of them?

Other Christians insist that it simply is unclear what Paul meant in Romans 1:26ff. by "natural" and "unnatural" relations, and whatever Paul did mean does not necessarily provide a basis for what Christian theology traditionally has referred to as "natural law." Modern philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists have rejected the notion of a static or fixed concept of "human nature" in part because of overwhelming empirical evidence of the plurality and random diversity of different ways of being human. What does that imply for our understanding of human sexuality?

Third, important theological considerations emerge in practically every discussion of homosexuality. We have already alluded to the significance of the themes of covenant, commitment, and promise keeping. These themes mean that human faithfulness is an imperfect reflection of the faithfulness of God, and that Christian faith cannot accept any and every form of human sexual behavior. While it is perhaps not the case that human promises must always be kept and can never be broken, it is clear that in the context of Christian faith and life promises of commitment have important implications for human relationships, not just in marriage but in all forms of human intercourse, including that between sexual partners, heterosexual and homosexual. Christians who call themselves "liberal" should not turn Christian love into cheap grace. They do so when they suggest that any form of human behavior is acceptable to God and should be condoned by the Christian community.

At the same time, Christians who call themselves "conservative" must not assume that the category of "sin" can be applied to any form of sexual activity that is not heterosexual. Is homosexual practice sinful? If homosexuality is, as some medical researchers insist, not an orientation that an individual has chosen, not the result of voluntary decision, then in what sense is it sinful? Theologians have argued that the doctrine of original sin means that sin is both a human act and a state or condition which transcends human acts, but that does not mean created humanity is itself sinful. What God created God called "good."

Some Christians argue that it is not the sexual orientation (that is, the person) but the act or the practice (that is, the deed) which is sinful. Hence homosexuals who want to live within the church must choose to be sexually inactive, or at least not to practice their sexuality in a homosexual manner. On the other hand, both sexuality and its expression seem to be part of what it means to be a human creature. While some Christians may voluntarily choose celibacy as an expression of their commitment to Christ, should the church argue that regardless of whether an individual has a call from God to celibate ministry that person must renounce an essential dimension of his or her humanity in order to be a faithful Christian?

Two other theological topics that are relevant to this discussion are love and justice. Christians often insist that they must not be separated from one another. Love without justice leads in the direction of cheap grace, and justice without love degenerates into graceless legalism. But what do love and justice imply about the Christian community's response to homosexuality? In the first place, it may be appropriate for Christians to begin not by discussing the

sinfulness of homosexuality (whatever that is), but by acknowledging the homophobia prevalent in society and the church. As we have already suggested, those who believe homosexual activity to be contrary to Christian faith are not necessarily homophobic. Faithful Christians may indeed hold that position. But those who do hold that point of view should acknowledge that the sign of homophobia is widespread in society, and they might struggle with the question of whether it plays an unacknowledged role in their negative appraisal of homosexuality.

Christian love does not mean that human sexuality is an utterly private matter and that the Church must accept whatever forms of sexual behavior individuals choose to practice. Christians must struggle with what commitment and promise making and keeping mean in relation to all forms of sexual activity. It is no longer clear that sexual promiscuity is more of a problem for homosexuals than for heterosexuals. On the other hand, the church has every right to ask about the meaning of faithfulness and commitment for those living in homosexual relationships.

Finally, whatever Christians say about homosexuality should be said with a large dose of modesty, a modesty rooted in an awareness of sinfulness of all of our personal lives and in our knowledge that there is much about both human sexuality and homosexuality that we do not understand. Indeed, it may well be that a hundred years from now Christians will look back on what twentieth century Christians have said about homosexuality with the same embarrassment we have when we examine what our nineteenth century parents in the faith said about Charles Darwin and evolution.

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